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ABSTRACT

Suggestions are made to help the substitute teacher successfully cope with problems that may arise in the classroom. Examined are techniques for retaining control in the classroom, dealing with specific "games" students commonly play with substitutes, and how to apply the permanent teacher's lesson plan. (JD)

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The Substitute Adventure

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WANTED: One who thrives on rising at early hours, meeting many strangers, surviving in unfamiliar environments, playing policeman, practicing clinical psychology, and living in America on less than thirty-five dollars a day.

Job Description

Each year thousands of people vie for this position---the substitute teacher. The equipment needed to begin the business includes the California teaching credential, a telephone to receive those early morning calls, and a good map. At-the-job supplies include pencils to occupy the active hands of those few students who forget theirs and paper to make anecdotal records of the day.

Before the substitute adventure begins, many forms and applications must be completed. Most districts require that your credential be registered at the county office of education, that a current T.B. clearance be on file, and that a teaching application be submitted. In very popular districts, these prequisites may gain the applicant a place on the district's substitute waiting list. In other districts, with these formalities aside, the applicant may immediately find himself in a classroom.

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Preparations

The job is much easier if the substitute teacher is familiar with the mechanics of the school system. Don't be fooled by a white "permit to leave the building" thrust in your face by an impatient student, when the school's permits are printed on yellow paper. Become familiar with the names of the administrative personnel. A threat to be sent to "Mr. Smith," the dean, is meaningless when all the students know that there is no one by that name at their school. Know class period times so that students don't scatter for an unexpected bell during the middle of class. Learn the plant layout so that when students ask to get a drink of water, you know in which direction they should be going.

Try to meet the other teachers at the school, especially the department chairpersons. They may give you a more reliable idea of just how the school really operates. Department heads will also provide some idea of the materials being studied at the school. They might also remember you, if a vacancy in their area arises.

Once you complete the application process, and you find yourself in an empty classroom, there are several defensive maneuvers to make before the students arrive. First, look for any possible temptations. Extra erasers are always popular for launching into the air. A stack of easily accessible paper is great raw material for the classroom's aeronautical engineers.

Next, study over the lesson plans. There may be built-in disasters. I once had to direct a concave/ convex image assignment for a junior high science class.

It appeared innocent and with the regular teacher, it probably would have been. But soon after I distributed the flashlights and turned off the lights for the students to begin making the images, the class turned into a light show at a circus. I quickly postponed the assignment until the teacher returned.

Be sure to check for the necessary equipment for the lesson plans. A girls' P.E. class I was teaching one day came to an abrupt halt when a student kicked the only volley ball up into the ceiling grid and it didn't come down. The game broke up, and the girls disappeared into the locker room---fifteen minutes early. If I had had an extra ball, I could have quickly thrown it into the game.

It is important to also keep a count of the equipment during the day. There are always souvenir hunters in the classroom who take pride in collecting dissecting needles from science class or bobbins from homemaking or typing books from typing class. Once a student gets the equipment out of the room, it is difficult to ever retrieve it.

Games Students Play

As the students enter the room, the confrontation begins. Students seem to be committed by honor to give the "sub" a bad time. Being aware of the games students play will help the substitute to be the winner each time. Amnesia is a popular warm-up game. As the teacher is calling roll, either no one will answer or there will be three or four "Wilfred Wheatons" in the class. If the student's true identity isn't immediately needed, a quip such as "What a popular name!" may have a deflating effect on this game.

Break-Down is a frequently played game of sabotage in the classroom. Malfunctioning audio-visual equipment is a great classroom disruption. Check over the operating diagrams; the sound/silent switch of the 16mm movie projector can easily be tampered with by a quick-handed student.

Another game is Slip-Out. Check the room for "escapes." If the room has more than one exit, the class may demonstrate the scientific principle that the teacher can only be in one place at one time.

To squelch this activity, it is important for the substitute to play the numbers game. Count the number of students at the beginning of the class. During a lab class, it is very easy for students to play this game. Closing one of the doors, if possible, can make the escapes noisier, at least.

Dispensation is a game that may give the substitute a false feeling of power. Students are politely asking for your permission, and they have such legitimate requests---locker pass, restroom pass, office pass, etc. But, if you begin this game, many students will never return. You are being paid to endure fifty minutes of confinement within four walls, and so can they!

A disabling game that can prove to be defeating for the substitute is Alien. Students will often try to make the substitute feel like an outsider, but remember you are not alone. Get to know the staff and students at each school, show them that you care, and then you should be able to beat this game.

If you have successfully maintained your equilibrium during the preceding games, you most likely will not

experience the escalation. But giving the substitute teacher a bad time has become a tradition in many schools. Cheech and Chong's routine, Sister Mary Elephant, further helped to entrench this time-honored tradition. As the record ends with the substitute teacher's plaintive, "Class!", one can hardly imagine what horror will ensue.

To avoid escalation, beware of the caching of any potential war materie. (rubber bands, paper clips, staples, etc.). Imaginative students may also use pyracantha berries (in season), balloons, or shredded paper. At one school, I discovered a boy hunched over his desk in the back of the room chewing tobacco and spitting the brown slime on the floor.

If you do ever experience this stage of escalation, confiscate the materials as soon as possible. It's also important to get any debris on the floor picked up before the next class enters, or else the new class will know which "side" won the games during the last period.

Benefits

At this point, you may be questioning why substitute? It is important to consider the reasons for substituting. First, it is a good way to keep abreast with the teaching profession if you don't have the time or opportunity for full time teaching. It may be a continuing teacher education program. During my years of substituting, I worked in twenty-one different schools. That gave me an opportunity to compare different teachers' approaches to their classes.

Substituting also provides contact with a wide variety of children in a non-grading relationship. You are their teacher for the day, but you do not give final grades, and therefore may appear less threatening.

Finally, substituting gains you recognition in a district and the possibility of long term employment. One personnel director stated that many of his district's substitutes were eventually given full time employment, because they had already proven themselves in the classroom.

Round One

Timing is an important skill for the substitute teacher. Don't begin speaking until there is a perceptible lull in talking. Sister Mary Elephant (in the Cheech and Chong routine earlier mentioned) began too early with an inaudible, "Good morning, Class". After repeating it three times, her only alternative was a deafening "CLASS!".

To begin a class, introduce yourself and then call the roll. Even if a seating chart is available, I call the names. It helps me to make a personal contact, and it may be crucial to remember a few names for later assistance. Sometimes I lightly write in pencil some identifying description by a student's name. (Example: John--yellow shirt)

In addition to giving the assignment, it is helpful to write it out on the blackboard. Students then know that something is expected of them. Also, it avoids quibbling over what a student thinks you just said. Try to read the assignment directly from the teacher's plan book; it lends credibility to your words. If possible, announce that work will be collected at the end of class; it helps to emphasize the importance of the assignment.

If the assignment is individual desk work, don't retreat to the security of the teacher's desk. Stroll down those long forbidding rows. This is an opportunity for personalization. Help students who are having problems. Praise students who are doing well. Incidentally, your "patrol" will also hinder any clandestine plots to oust the substitute.

If a question you can't answer comes up during class, don't act omniscient. You can't be expected to know everything. Avoid asking the entire class, however.

Even the honest ones will often bow to peer pressure and not give a straight answer. Try to single out a reliable student for answering any of your questions.

If you find it necessary to make threats, be sure that it is something you can really enforce. Some students may be curious enough just to test you.

Do be aware of the school's behavior referral system. It is much better to exile someone from the room to maintain order for the other class members than to allow one person to spoil the entire class. Always check with the office to learn what action was taken on the referral. Students sometimes don't take a substitute seriously, and they mysteriously get lost along the way to the office.

Keep in mind that student behavior is often motivated by a need for recognition. Be quick to praise positive behavior in the classroom, then students won't need to resort to negative behavior for recognition.

Covering the Gaps

Re-assessment is a very important part of substituting. It is most helpful to do so early in the day. First, evaluate the lesson plan. Did it fill the time period or did you have extra time? Playing "Hangman" with words from the day's lesson could fill an extra ten minutes. Next, evaluate your interaction with the students. Student bodies differ, and effective methods in one school may not work in another one. Finally, it is helpful to write a brief summary of the class for the teacher. You can be sure that the students will have their own version of the day's activities.

During a substitute career, everyone at some time will experience the sinking feeling of finding no lesson plans. Don't panic; rather, look at this as an opportunity

to shape your own plans. On a teaching assignment, always bring along a book, magazine, or newspaper. You can read and discuss excerpts from these during the class time.

If time permits, check with the department head for suggestions or with the school librarian. These people may have extra materials to help you. The librarian may also agree to accept one or two students from your classes who don't get involved with anything in your classroom.

Some classes lend themselves well to all-purpose assignments. Depending on the grade level, you can fill the blackboard with long division or multiplication problems for a math class to do. English and social studies classes may be given writing assignments during the period. For an English class, read part of a story aloud and then have the students write a good ending. For a social studies class, read and discuss a current event article and then have the students write a paper explaining their opinions on the issue.

Looking Back

At the end of the teaching day, as you turn in the room keys and leave the school, you might flash back over the day's activities. As a substitute, you have been able to walk in someone else's shoes---a rare opportunity. And, unlike many full time teachers, you are able to walk away empty-handed from the school with no papers to correct that night.

During my three years of substituting, I was greatly rewarded. In a Piedmont High School English seminar, I was first exposed to Richard Adams' epic tale, Shardik. In an Alameda High School class, I explored the business district with the students and later discussed ways to upgrade the city's appearance. Teaching a film class in Crockett, I gained a new appreciation of the artistic skills of the Northwest Coast Indians' masks that were used in the film, Loon's Necklace.

During my substituting, I established some meaningful relationships with students and staff members. All of these experiences lead me to conclude that the substitute teacher position can be very rewarding.